

Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER III

Robert Parkinson Wilkinson Goliad County

NOTABLE among those first families whose descendants still live in Southwest Texas was that of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Parkinson Wilkinson of Berclair, Goliad county.

Both had English ancestry. Mr. Wilkinson was born in Helmsley, Yorkshire, England, June 28, 1831. He attended school in England, and was apprenticed to learn the "joiners" or carpenter's trade. But, when he was 19 years of age, having a thirst for adventure, and a desire to make his mark in the world, he came to Montreal, Canada, then to Detroit, where he worked on some of the large buildings. Later he went to St. Louis, then down the Mississippi by boat to New Orleans, and finally landed at Indianola. There he joined an expedition directed by William N. Varnell to search for gold in Burnet county, but he returned later to Indianola, richer in experience only.

In 1859, he married Mary Fletcher Brown, daughter of Thomas M. Brown, a pioneer Methodist preacher who had been licensed to *Exhort*, and who lived in Saluria, Matagorda Island. The Brown family had come from England to Maine before the French and Indian Wars, moved to Ohio, later to Indianola, and then to Saluria. Reverend Brown was the circuit rider preacher for the Bois d' Arc and Columbia circuits during the days of the Republic of Texas. He was known as the Methodist preacher who did not like fried chicken.

Thus, the couple of English ancestry, a lusty pioneer spirit, and a genuine love for Texas, married and planned to establish their home at Saluria, Matagorda Island.

But, before the house could be built of lumber shipped from Florida, the inhabitants were forced by the Union troops to evacuate the island. Mr. Wilkinson had purchased what is known now as the Weiss Ranch near Berclair, Goliad county. He moved his wife, two small children, Annie and Etta, and his mother-in-law (the father-in-law having passed away previously) there. Etta,



Above—Thomas Hancock Wilkinson, youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson, in front of the old home. Lower—Present home of the "Wilkinson girls," built in 1937 by the older sister, Mrs. Etta Wilkinson Terrell.

the baby child, was blistered badly by the heat from the sun during that long ride in the buggy. Mr. Wilkinson barely had time to put up the walls of their new home before leaving to join the Confederate Army, in which he served with distinction until General Lee's surrender.

Blankets were hung over the windows and doors to keep out the wind and rain. Mrs. Wilkinson, her two small children and her mother, were left alone in a new country. But, as the wife and daughter of a circuit rider preacher, both were accustomed to endure hardships, and to make the most of their opportunities.

Mrs. Brown took care of the home and tended the children, while Mrs. Wilkinson managed the ranch. About one thousand sheep had been moved with the family from Saluria, but Mr. Wilkinson did not have time to return for the cattle. They probably became "wild" as did the other cattle that were left by the Mexicans and others in Southwest Texas who moved into Mexico just after the Texas Revolution.

As Mrs. Wilkinson herded the sheep she knitted. Help could usually be secured to shear the sheep. The Wilkinson family did not own slaves. So the women did the work on the ranch, also the carding, spinning, weaving and sewing for the family.

They slept on home-made woolen mattresses, and under home woven blankets and old-fashion coverlets. Woolen dresses and coats were made of home spun materials from the home grown wool. And

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after the war Mr. Wilkinson wore home spun and home made woolen suits that were reversible, one side being grey and the other brown. Native dyes made of live oak bark, walnut, and wild currant root, were used.

Even in that early day the country suffered from drouth. Mr. Wilkinson came home on a furlough in December. A few drops of rain fell on him as he mounted his horse. No more rain fell until June. Then, the floods came. Milk purlsey was practically the only food available. Water for household use was hauled from the creek. All of the horses were stolen, either by the Indians or thieves, except one span. These two horses were kept hobbled near the house, where they could be closely watched.

The Wilkinson's usually had plenty of milk, plenty of jerked beef and mutton, and occasionally pork. One of the hardest things Mrs. Wilkinson had to do was to kill a hog. She hit it on the back with a heavy rock, and while it was down she cut off its head. She would ride miles to get wild greens, such as lamb's quarter and poke greens. She ground corn meal on a small Dutch windmill. The following anecdote shows the scarcity of flour.

"If I had some flour I would make a pie," said Mrs. Wilkinson to her mother.

In a little while her three-year-old daughter, Annie, proudly walked in from the yard with her little apron full of flowers and handed them to her mother.

"Now, you can make a pie," she stated.

Cooking was done on the fireplace until after the war. Then a stove was bought. A garden was planted, and wild grapes were gathered from creek bottoms. Jelly was made from wild currants, or agarita.

The first lamp the children ever saw was after the war. Mrs. Mainland, the wife of a boat captain, brought a little brass lamp from New Orleans. Light was provided by home made candles. These were made by pouring melted tallow into moulds around a string, which was used for a wick.



MRS. ROBERT PARKINSON WILKINSON



ROBERT PARKINSON WILKINSON
(Picture taken right after the Civil War)

Mr. Wilkinson returned from the army and took charge of the ranch, and later added cattle. When cattle began to push sheep into second place, he built one of the first wire fences in that section of the State. It was made of smooth rather than barbed wire. Each wire was passed through three holes in each post.

Stopping Point on Trail

Mr. Wilkinson was a born trader, so he opened a store to sell small necessities to the ranchers. His business grew until he had three stores, one at San Domingo, one at Ganderville, a cross roads post in the vicinity of Ellis Ranch, and one near the site of the present Lucas ranch home. These stores were general merchandise stores, carrying a full supply of dry goods, groceries and all kinds of equipment needed on a ranch. Goliad was one of the first "stocker" markets before the Civil War. After the war, when the price of cattle became better, great herds were driven from this section of the State to the markets in Kansas. Mr. Wilkinson built a big corral in which to herd the cattle while the drivers rested there overnight.

In order to secure lumber to build pens of sufficient size, he put up a saw mill near his home on Miller's Creek. Planks were sawed from the liveoaks. A grist mill also was established.

While Mr. Wilkinson was devoting his time to the business of ranching and supplying the needs of his customers, Mrs. Wilkinson was busy inside the home, but was his ever-ready helper when needed. She could sell a bill of goods up to \$500 in a very short time because she knew so well what was needed both

in the homes and on the ranches. She could also take charge of any activity on the ranch when the occasion demanded. She was the trusted friend of the cattleman, and when the drivers spent the night there, huge sums of money, which they usually carried in their leather belts, were handed over to Mrs. Wilkinson for safekeeping.

There were no banks. Everybody carried money, or kept it in the home. Once, when Mr. Wilkinson was moving a family of Mexicans, he brought home a box of silver money. He told Mrs. Wilkinson she could have it if she could carry it upstairs. But it was too heavy.

Mr. Wilkinson had taken out naturalization papers long before the Civil War. And while he devoted his time to the expansion of his ranching and supplying the needs of his customers, he accumulated large tracts of land. He believed in the country, and was ever ready to lend any assistance to the development of its resources. He was one of the men in that section who worked to get the railroad to come through. He devoted much of his time to gardening, and loved fine horses. There are some still living who remember the fine leather upholstered, nickel trimmed carriage, drawn by a handsome span of horses so high spirited that they could not be pulled to a stop when first hitched to the carriage. Mr. Wilkinson would circle the block, members of the family deftly swinging in as he passed.

And as his business expanded, so did his home grow in size and beauty to meet the needs of the steadily increasing family of eight children. The first home was on the now Weiss Ranch. Mr. Wil-

kinson sold it, and later bought it back. The second home, on Miller's Creek, was a large, two-story structure known as Silver Lake Cottage. The Wilkinson Home was famous for its hospitality. Friends and strangers were ever welcome. But they resented feeding loafers. A group formed the habit of sitting around the mill, whittling and telling stories to pass away the time, waiting for the invitation from the mill hands to "come up to the house and eat with us." Mr. Wilkinson finally instructed his hands not to extend the invitation, and the loafers disappeared. Both Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson believed firmly in the pioneer principle to accumulate property, and live off it. They were ever ready to encourage their neighbors and friends to accumulate something for themselves.

Dances, Social Event

One of the biggest social events of that day was the dance given by the Wilkinsons when a big supply of goods was received. A general invitation was extended to the people of Goliad and adjoining counties, usually by the *grapevine* method. For every one, according to pioneer hospitality, who heard about the dance considered himself invited. Then came the preparation. As the time drew near, excitement mounted higher and higher throughout the country. Horses were groomed and made ready to start in plenty of time, frequently starting early in the morning, if the drive could be made in a day. People came on horseback, in buggies, buckboards and wagons. It was necessary for the guests to arrive in the afternoon



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in order to get the horses watered and fed, attend to their personal toilets and eat supper.

Mrs. Wilkinson would be busy for days preparing the food. Barbecuing beef and mutton had to be "bossed." She baked bread in the furnace of the mill, also large quantities of cakes and pies of all kinds. Chicken salad, floating island, and syllabub were also favorite dishes. There was plenty of coffee.

They danced all night on the upper floor of the mill building to the rhythm of the fiddles and the shouts of the callers, to such tunes as *Old Dan Tucker*, *Captain Jinks* and *Virginia Reel*. Then waltzes, quadrilles, polkas, and schottisches followed each other in rapid order throughout the night. The dancers refreshed themselves as they wished from the bountifully spread table. About sunrise, breakfast was served, the horses saddled, or harnessed, and the guests after taking a cup of black coffee, started sleepily but happily on their way home.

The older children walked three miles to attend school in a log cabin about three months during each year. When the two older girls—Annie and Etta—were fourteen and twelve years of age, they were sent to Goliad to attend Professor Brooks' school, known as Goliad College. Mr. Wilkinson erected a two-room house where Grandmother Brown stayed and kept the children during the school term. Later he purchased a larger house and the entire family lived there during the time necessary to send the children to school. Annie and Etta graduated there in 1881. According to Etta, now Mrs. Terrell, other members of the graduating class were: Lem Foster, Roger Knox, Oliver and Percy Caldwell. Mrs. Etta Terrell and Oliver Cald-

well, who lives in Corpus Christi, are the only living member of that class.

Graduations were great events. The building was so crowded on the night of the commencement exercises for this class that the members had to enter the building through a back stairway. Etta remembers with pride her beautiful white ruffled organdy dress that had a slight train. The two Wilkinson boys—Fletcher and Tom, and Bertha and Lorlene, also attended school in Goliad. The two younger girls, Carlyle and Regina, attended school in St. Mary's Hall in San Antonio.

Old Home Burned

In 1890, the family moved back to the first ranch on which the home now stands in the edge of the present town of Berclair. They came by train on the new railroad, and lived in a small house until a large, two-story house could be constructed. It burned in 1898. The following extract clipped from a local paper is pasted across the back of an old photograph of this house:

"The Wilkinson mansion of Berclair was of modern style and tastily furnished, and is a serious loss. It was known as a place of genuine hospitality, and none knew better how to entertain than the Wilkinsons. The aged grandmother was living there at the time. The family escaped barefooted."

Another two-story house was erected on the same ranch, but not on the exact spot of the old one. Mr. Wilkinson died there in 1906, and Mrs. Wilkinson in 1925.

Only two of the Wilkinson girls who are living married. Etta married E. L. Terrell, a ranchman of Victoria county, the younger girl—Regina Adeal—married Mr. New. Both are widows.

After Mr. Terrell's death, Mrs. Terrell preferred to live at home "with the girls" and help take care of her aged mother. Her son and his wife continued to live on the ranch in Victoria until his death. Then she bought out the heirs, brothers and grand children of the Wilkinsons, to the two thousand-acre ranch, so that now it belongs to the "Wilkinson girls." This past year she erected a handsome semi-colonial, cream colored brick residence that is to be their home for the remainder of their lives. The girls still feel keenly the loss of many treasures destroyed by the fire of 1898. Mrs. Terrell was, therefore, determined that this home should be as nearly as possible fire proof. The frame work, made of sixty tons of steel, is said by the company from which the steel was purchased, to be the largest steel structural residence ever built by that company. The floors all have a concrete foundation. There are twenty rooms in the house, besides the attic and basements, which are furnished with rare and beautiful antiques.

Carlyle manages the ranch, while Lorlene manages the four hundred-acre farm. The youngest Wilkinson girl, Mrs. New, has been postmistress in Berclair for several years, and her daughter is the adored young lady of the Wilkinson household. Mrs. Terrell and Miss Bertha, as older sisters, are happy in the knowledge that the girls will have a lovely and comfortable home as long as they live. And, as the early Wilkinson home was famous for its pioneer hospitality, so is the present home. Any member of the family is ever ready to show a visitor through the home and discuss the rare pieces of old furniture and lovely old pictures.

Mrs. Terrell became a real benefactor in the community when she built the lovely home by making it possible for the citizens of that community to enjoy electric lights. She paid the \$3,000 necessary to have electricity brought to her home with the understanding that the community also could have the benefits of it.

Two of the children are dead. They are Annie, who married S. L. Moore of Goliad, and Thomas Hancock Wilkinson. Those who are still living, and who live in or near Berclair, are Etta, who married E. L. Terrell, Mrs. Regina Adeal New, and Misses Bertha Jane, Lorlene and Carlyle, and Robert Fletcher Wilkinson.

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